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THE GUN POWDER STORY

Editorial Notes by T. C. Elliott

There have appeared in various contributions—romantic and otherwise—to the literature of the Pacific Coast accounts of an occurrence at the mouth of the Walla Walla river participated in by the officer in charge of the Hudson's Bay Company trading post there, Fort Walla Walla, and the Indians, and termed the Gunpowder Story. Recently a narration of that story by the officer himself has become available in the form of a letter written to the late Elwood Evans in March, 1882, when Mr. Evans was gathering data for his contributions to the History of the Pacific Northwest, published 1889. The narrative shows a tendency to elaboration quite natural forty years after an event, but specifies names and family connections among Indians who were prominent in the first Indian War of Oregon and illustrates the high level of the relationship maintained between the traders of the Hudson's Bay Company and the Indians. It also contains a direct reference to the name "The White Head" as applied to Doctor McLoughlin.

The letter is drawn from the letter-book of its author, the late Mr. Archibald McKinlay, who was, in 1882, residing at Lac La Hache in British Columbia. Mr. McKinlay was a chief trader of the Hudson's Bay Company and afterward became a citizen of Oregon, residing at Oregon City from 1846 until about 1862. His certificate of marriage with the daughter of Peter Skene Ogden has been reproduced in fac simile in the Oregon Historical Quarterly (Vol. 10, p. 325, et seq.), but it was omitted there to state that the certificate was written in the hand of Mr. Ogden himself. This gunpowder incident must have taken place in the summer of 1843, for it was later than the promulgation of Dr. Elijah White's laws in December, 1842, and it was prior to the departure of Mr. Ogden on leave in the spring of 1844. The original Fort Walla Walla was burned in the fall of 1841. This same story as told on pp.

690-91 of Vol. 2 of History of Northwest Coast from MSS. dictated to Mr. Bancroft himself at Victoria in 1878, illustrates the Bancroft method of popularizing his text; for this volume of the series of Bancroft histories was written by Mr. Bancroft himself (see p. 52, Vol. 4, of this Quarterly).

Mr. Elwood Evans,
Tacoma, Wash.

Dear Sir: I will now send you the gunpowder story in detail:

At Walla Walla it was the duty of the officer in charge to furnish horses, pack saddles and other equipment to all and every party requiring the same. All over the country from Utah to British Columbia: I had a man especially employed to make pack saddles. The only hard wood we could find for the purpose was Birch; this we got from the Blue Mountains at least fifty miles away. My saddles for the season were finished; however there was a quantity of saddle wood in the saddle maker's house. I happened to go in one day and found the saddle wood diminished in bulk. I remarked the same to the saddle maker; his reply was that both Indians and whites helped themselves to the wood & that he thought the wood was not required. I told him that if the wood was not required then it would be required in another year, to allow no person to take a stick of it. A few days after while busily employed writing the saddle maker opened my door and told me an Indian was taking a piece of the wood, that he had remonstrated with him & that he would not give it up. I asked my clerk Mr. Wm. Todd to go and see about it. In a few minutes after I heard some noise which induced me to go to the window; I saw an Indian rush out of the saddle maker's house, pick up a stone & before you could say Jack Robertson Todd was out grappling with him and happening to have two other Indians standing by they also got hold of Todd. I drove the two off, to give Todd fair play. The consequence was that altho. Todd's opponent was a stronger man than himself, he had thrown him down and

kicked him unmercifully. On separating them I inquired of them who his opponent was; he told me he was the son of Pio Pio Mox-Mox, the big chief of the Walla Walla (tribe). I blamed Todd for being so hasty and told him we would have some trouble. All the men except Todd, the saddle-maker and myself, were out in the fields about two miles away. However, I expected a big talk, but did not anticipate anything worse. About an hour after the old chief accompanied by some forty or sixty men came in by the back gate of the Fort through the kitchen into my room. On seeing him wishing to be polite I offered him a chair, instead of accepting the same he & his men flew by me to Todd and took hold of him; as soon as I could get among them I was in time to take hold of the chief's arm who had a tomahawk in his hand & was about bringing it down on Todd's head. I managed to draw him toward my desk where I had three pistols (not revolvers) hanging probably not loaded. As the chief and I were scuffling the men who had hold of Todd let go apparently to see what we were about to do. I handed one pistol to Todd, kept two for myself with the order not to fire till I give the word. The chief then presented his naked breast & asked me whether I was going to shoot him. "Shoot me. You shoot a man," said he. I replied such was by no means my wish, but if he again attempted to use his tomahawk on Todd's head I would certainly use my pistol. Then ensued a long conversation about Dr. White's laws, wherein if an Indian struck a white man he would be flogged & if a white man struck an Indian that he also would be flogged. I told the chief that I would not submit to anything of the kind, that if his son had thrashed my young man, I would have thought nothing more of it. He still insisted of having Todd flogged. I told him that they would have to kill me first. While thus talking the young man who had been thrashed by Todd gave me a severe blow from behind hitting me under the fifth rib. I took him by the hair of the head intending first to strike him, but knowing to do so would be sure death, I let him go & thinking of a keg of

powder in the adjoining room I sprung to the door, took hold of a flint & steel and defied them to touch Todd. Before I could think of what I was about there was not an Indian in the house except the old chief and his son; the former after sitting moodily for a few minutes addressed me thus, "Don't you think you are very smart to frighten my young men so? You can't frighten me. I have heard that you white people are in the habit of taking guns and challenging one another; let's you & I do the same." My reply was: "there are only six whites of us here and there are as many hundreds of you. Should you kill me there is no one to take my place as chief of the whites. Should I kill you there are plenty in your tribe as good if not better men than yourself." At this he went off in high dudgeon; sent messengers to the Cayuses & Nez Perces that his son was killed by the whites, & for two days Indians gathered round the Fort but none came inside the gate; something unusual. On the evening of the second day the Five Crows, a Cayuse Chief, an uncle of the young man who got the thrashing, a very old friend of the whites & a man who had a very great regard for me, came from a distance and entered the Fort without ever knowing anything of what occurred. I must here digress a little and mention that a few days previously Mr. Ogden had passed down taking my wife to Vancouver, so when the Five Crows came in I enquired whether he had heard the news, referring to my trouble with the Indians; his answer was that he had. "I have heard," he said, "that your father-in-law (Mr. Ogden) has lost two men by the upsetting of the boat at the Dalles." I told him that I had also heard of that accident but that I did not mean that, but my trouble with his brother-in-law, the Walla Walla chief. He wished to know the particulars. I told him that he would find out the trouble from the Indians as Indians considered the white men liars. On this he said: "did you ever know me to doubt your word or to go among Indians listening to their idle tattle?" I answered: "now as you have spoken, I will tell you," and of course repeated what had happened. He ex-

pressed himself sorry for what had happened, saying that it was a great disgrace for a chief's son to be thrashed. I explained to him that if my young man had got the worst of the fight I would think nothing of it & that they were both of them to blame; to this he said nothing but remained in the Fort all night alone attended by an Indian boy. Next morning he said he would send for the father, sent his boy accordingly. To my surprise he came to me saying, "My brother-in-law knows I am a peace maker & he will not come" (at this time they were not in speaking terms). Shortly the Five Crows went off saying that he might see his brother Tawato, head chief of the Cayuses, & would give my version of the story. At noon the same day, Tawato came to the Fort accompanied by Elijah, an elder Brother of the young man who got a thrashing, & a young man who had received a considerable smattering of English, reading & writing at the Methodist Institute at the Willamette. They were both cleanly dressed fully armed with guns, pistols & swords. This was in my opinion carried more for show than for violence. After being seated for some time without saying a word Tawato made known the object of his visit; it was if there was not a possibility of our coming to some arrangement of settling the difficulty. After explaining my case, he proposed to send for the father. The father accordingly came, accompanied at last by five or six hundred Indians, if I remember rightly they were not all armed. They filled the house, every nook & cranny of the fort yard crowded outside of the windows. Every available space was occupied by them. After Peo Peo Mox-Mox came in he & I agreed to explain our case to Tawato and to cut a long yarn short, Peo-Peo Mox-Mox told me he had nothing particular against me personally, but that I must send Mr. Todd out of the country immediately. I replied I would do nothing of the kind, that Todd had been sent to me by The White Head (McLoughlin) as my assistant, that he had not committed a fault, that I would not discharge him, that they had strength enough to kill us but our lives would be re-

venged, if his heart was not good toward Todd it could not be good toward me. Then he sprung from his seat beating his breast, saying "my heart will never be good," & rushing out of the door; a few minutes of a dead silence ensued. You might hear a pin drop. When Towato arose to his feet sternly addressing me, telling me that I was a fool, that I wanted blood & that I would get enough of it. Another term of silence ensued as impressive as the last lasting a few minutes; it was a critical time. Giving myself time to think I asked Tawato whether he was chief or not; he sneeringly answered, "ask my young men." I told him I knew that he was the son of a great chief, that his father was known among the early whites as a great and a good man, that no number of white men would make him through fear do wrong, that I was a chief, that notwithstanding the number that were standing around me would not make me change one iota of what I said. Then followed a murmuring sound as of a consultation in low tones which lasted for sometime. I observed the chief give an order that caused a young man to leave the room. Shortly after Peo Peo Mox-Mox entered the room and without any preface or ceremony came forward and offered me his hand in token of friendship. I looked with an expression of surprise and took his hand; then asked him whether his heart was good. He answered "yes," striking his breast. I then asked him whether his heart was good towards Todd; his reply was "yes & to prove it & wipe out all ill feeling for ever my son is coming with a horse as a present for Todd." To seal the compact I made the son a present of a suit of clothes and smoked the pipe of peace, a peace which lasted the whole time I remained with him. I have been more proud of the termination of this incident than the gunpowder plot for I believe I ought to give myself the credit (for it was so conceded by my Brother Officers) I had secured a lasting peace "with honor" to all concerned without any bloodshed, whereas if I had acted in anyways hasty or without forethought or firmness it would be hard for me to say what the consequences might have been.

You might think that I was devoid of forethought & ask why did I not shut the gates. In answer I had no gates; the old Fort was burnt down & I was building a new one."